

Confronting World Terrorism – A Global Perspective

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TERRORISM AND DEMOCRACY

Ladies and Gentlemen. Like Gerard and P. J., I have lived in a conflict situation for most of my life. The experiential learning, gained through my witness of the pain and hurt caused by violence, has made me even more committed to ensuring we have the means, whereby, the roots of conflict can be eradicated. Living amidst an unresolved conflict, makes me even more committed to democracy and democratic methods than many of those who believe solely in the power of “might is right.”

Five years before the human waste of the Great War, as European Imperialists threw their last roll of the dice, Woodrow Wilson said, “I believe in democracy because it releases the energies of every human being . . . its whole purpose is that we may hold counsel with one another, so as not to depend on the understanding of one man, but to depend upon the counsel of all.” He believed, as I do, that acts of violence, whether by governments or others, should only be acts of last resort, when the counsel of all has been sought.

The difficulty with a topic seeking to define terrorism is that there is no real global agreement on what defines a terrorist or an act of terrorism. In some ways, we have allowed our definition of terrorism or terrorists, to be defined by those who think that there is such a thing as a conventional war. Wars, by their very nature, are meant to terrorize, but its only victors are those who tend to write the history and have the heroes. Yet, what was conventional about the war methods waged by the Spanish conquistadors in Latin America, the terror tactics of British army against the Boers in South Africa, or the near genocide methods of past U.S. Governments against Native Americans? The concept of normalcy, about so-called conventional wars and the tactics waged in them, is no more than invention of generals and politicians who make war-using people like pawns on a chessboard. Did not the terrible acts of mass destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki leave a world terrorized? People across the world have felt terrorized,

sometimes by their own governments, sometimes by other governments, and often by committed fanatics, whose only counsel is their own self belief. If we are to confront so-called “terrorism,” we need to de-bunk a few myths first.

We have all witnessed horrific acts of violence carried out in the name of one cause or another. However, while the victims of such violence and those who share the same value systems as the victims may be outraged, the sad fact is that many others with different values may not. I say that from personal experience. As a student, I was caught up in the bombing of my university by the IRA. Like many others, I was outraged at the time. Yet, some nationalists condoned the attack as being justified, as the police who were regarded as legitimate targets, were studying part time at the college. That was 1983. It is now 2002. I now sit on the Northern Ireland Policing Board. Had I sat on the Policing Authority between 1983 and 1998, I too, would have been a legitimate target for the IRA and still am for the real IRA.

One thing I have learned through my own experiences is that no matter how horrific, politically motivated violence is not mindless. It may revolt you, but it is planned. Our problem is that one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter; while the West may salute the hero soldier, to others he is no more than the military arm of capitalism. Even here in the audience, some people may have had sympathy for the ANC, IRA, or maybe the PLO, while others were repulsed. In our own tinted view of the world, our own prejudices create the theatre with villains and heroes.

The fact that different geo-political and religious blocs around the world have such different worldviews and value systems is further compounded by apparent inconsistencies that now present themselves in western democracies and their foreign policies. In the west, we play with fire by attempting to define terrorism and terrorists on our own terms. Sometimes we encourage one brand of insurrectionists, only because it suits our own ends, but we dump them when it does not. More often than not, those very flames of resistance we once lit, burn us.

In 1990, in a Collection of Essays entitled “The Elusive Search for Peace”, the authors, Giliomee and Gagiano, outlined what they regarded as the three most persistent conflict situations on earth: South Africa, Israel, and Northern Ireland. From my own experience with the former Republic of Yugoslavia, I would have added the Balkan region. When it came to a potent mix of ethnicity, post-colonialism, religious difference, and disputed land, in scale and persistency, the Balkans won, hands down, the championship of conflicts. However, to talk about geographical regions that, on the surface, share common elements in their conflicts and their conflict resolutions, would be naïve. Each of those conflicts share unresolved differences and unheard hurts that, in turn, have bred subsequent generations to strike out at those ignoring their plight.

THE DIFFICULT DEFINITION OF TERRORISM

For us to seek a common worldwide approach to Terrorism is a non-starter because we do not agree on the meaning of terrorism nor do we agree on who are considered terrorists. Was George Washington a terrorist or insurrectionist? Is there a difference or does it matter? At the time, King George and the British Parliament did not have a very high regard for him. To them, he was guilty of treason, a charge shared by many modern day terrorists. The very American Constitution, born out of the War of Independence, with its clauses giving citizens the right to bear arms, has brought the threat of “home grown terrorism” even closer.

Our own United Irelanders' of the nineteenth century supported the use of violence against the British oppressor and yet, some of them like John Mitchell, also supported slavery, which at the time, was nothing short of institutional terrorism.

The most glaring examples of our inconsistencies on the subject of terrorism haunt us daily. Some are obvious:

- United States Special Forces fighting Taliban soldiers who use equipment supplied by the United States;
- Iraq, once supported by United States during its war with Iran, now characterized as Public Enemy Number One;
- Iraq, now facing military action because of failure to allow inspections by the United Nations Weapons Inspectors, while Israel is allowed to act with abandon regarding the human rights of Palestinians.

The Middle East is full of contradictions and is the best example of the relatively meaningless term “terrorist.” Does not Israel engage in State terrorism? Do not pro Western Arab States, governed by absolute monarchs or dictators, not terrorize their own people and others without western imprimatur?

Two recent events show clearly, the difficulties associated with using “terrorism” as the basis of Foreign Policy and the danger of any kind of moral absolutism:

1. Gerry Adams has been asked to appear in front of a U.S. Congressional Hearing in April 2002, to explain the links between the IRA and Marxist Columbian “narco-terrorists,” FARC.

A few short years ago, Gerry Adams could not get a visa to enter the United States because he was designated as the representative of a “terrorist” organization. He was not even allowed to speak on British or Irish television or radio. Now he sits alongside the Republican hawks in Washington and is a guest of a pro law and order Republican President in the White House.

This is very interesting, since three people associated with his Movement have been charged with training FARC troops in the methods of urban guerrilla tactics. Some Washington Republicans are uneasy about the connections between FARC and the IRA. Why are they surprised? The association between Gerry Adams and the three who were arrested is more than just a shared ideology. One of the three was the election agent for one of Sinn Fein's members of the Northern Ireland Parliament and another was the Party's official representative in Cuba – openly organizing Gerry Adams' subsequent visit there.

The association between Sinn Fein and the FARC should be more than a mild irritant for the administration of the United States. It should have been a national outrage and a massive embarrassment -- two terror organizations, one with access to the White House, openly sharing a Marxist ideology, and allegedly assisting each other in subversive tactics. One group is the darling of American political society with the ear of the President, and the other blamed for managing one of the biggest cocaine trails into the United States.

2. During the week of March 18, 2002, we watched South African President, Thebo Mbeki, share a stage with a host of world leaders to castigate Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe, and recommend sanctions against Zimbabwe, including suspension from the British Commonwealth.

The fact that Robert Mugabe was once hailed by Britain and the United States as a model leader in Africa, while Thebo Mbeki stood accused as a leading member of the "terrorist" ANC, seems to have escaped our democratic minds. Moreover, the flawed democracy, as practiced by Mugabe, is 100% more democratic than the system practiced by his immediate predecessor, Ian Smith, and before that, the British Government.

The fact that I highlight these examples, in no way, implies any judgment of the rights or wrongs involved. It is simply the way the world now works. Let us face up to the way it works and not be so outraged when things go so horribly wrong.

The point in my examples and the inconsistencies highlighted earlier only demonstrate the primacy of politics and the futility of labeling any nation or ideology "terrorism." The terms are not only meaningless, but also temporal.

For example, could or indeed would Gerry Adams and the IRA, have stopped bombing and murdering people in Britain and Ireland, if the U.S. and Britain had continued to hold them at arms length, refusing to engage on the basis that they were "terrorists"? Will Islamic fundamentalism ever engage peacefully with the United States or the West while being characterized as "psychotic" by the British Home Secretary and as "evil" by President George W. Bush?

No. The only way that positive, long-lasting, and just change can be effected is through politics. Our leaders know this. As the Labour MP, Hugh Gaitskell, said in 1977, "All

terrorists, at the invitation of the Government, end up with drinks at the Dorchester Hotel.”

However, the demands of the new global economy mean that there is little prospect of a more reflective global view of dealing with terrorism, anymore than there is the will to deal with the threat to the global environment or to tackle third world debt. For the most part, dominant economies do not match their armament expenditure in genuinely seeking to understand the strains caused by their unchecked commercial expansion.

GLOBALIZATION AND TERRORISM

The free market politics of companies like Coca-Cola, McDonalds, and others means that as expansion into foreign (in every sense) markets will continue, indigenous groups will come to resent what they see as the immorality and insensitivity of multinationals and ergo the Western democracies that spawned them. The wholesale swallowing up of cultures, whether economically or politically, will foster resistance whereby, the so-called global village creates the market for global terrorism. Former United States Congressman, Don Edwards, once said, “How can we expect other nations to respect our laws if we do not respect theirs?” In a nutshell, you have the answer to confronting many of the root causes of conflict. Yes, we might prefer if Colonel Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein did not exist, but they do. How would we feel if external governments wanted Louis Farrakhan or Pat Buchanan as President of the United States and sought to create the conditions to do so?

Yet, more fundamentally, it is our own lack of understanding of the values each of us holds true, which causes resentment. It is our own lack of respect for the humanity in each other that fosters hate. It is the lack of dignity we attach to the individual that creates tension. It is the fear of what we do not understand that makes some strike out. If threatened, oppressed, or exploited, any one of us has the potential to be a terrorist or be drawn to their cause.

CALLS FOR PEACE

Pope John XXIII, in his opening address to the Second Vatican Council said, “Experience has taught men that violence inflicted on others, that the might of arms and political domination, are of no help at all in finding a happy solution to the grave problems that afflict them.” His words so often forgotten are true. What begins in violence gets nowhere until talking and understanding are started. Over the next few days, you will discuss the tactics of confronting “terrorism” as you see it. The tactics and methods used by men of violence and the counter intelligence tactics used against it are, in my mind, too late. The zero sum game of pitching violence against violence does not work. It has only provided a temporary solution until the children of the vanquished can strike back.

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Global terrorism cannot be tackled, let alone be identified, unless the very organizations set up to reduce tension among communities and countries, are given more than lip service by the West.

In particular, the United Nations and its Human Rights Commission. If we armed these types of organizations the way we build our armies, the root causes of conflict could be dealt with more effectively.

Root causes of terrorism are found everywhere. Even the Costra Nostra started its life as a freedom fighters organization. Wherever there is oppression, the seeds of conflict are sown. Wherever there is inequality, the winds of wrath will blow. Wherever there is discrimination, the clouds of resentment will gather. These are issues that we must address if we are to hold true, as your constitution says, to the belief that “All men are born equal with inalienable rights, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Given that the peoples of many nations came to find their home in the United States, those words of your founding fathers should act as a charter of understanding for the world, if we respect and live up to their sentiments.

Finally, I came across a preface written by the late Cardinal Suenens, who was reflecting on the horrors of the Second World War and the marvel of man’s technical achievements in the twentieth century. He clearly highlighted the enormous scale and opportunity, for us all to pursue, in seeking out social justice throughout the world.

He wrote: “We do not know the hidden treasures of other cultures and noble traditions which could become, in the interchange, a common good for humanity . . . real revolution will be made when men learn to simply speak to each other and not merely co-exist side by side. We have discovered interplanetary space, but we have hardly explored the space that separates men from one another. We have thrown giant bridges across our rivers but we do not know how to build bridges from people to people. We know the power of nuclear energy, but have yet to discover the creative energy of peace and concord.”

If we can unlock the energy from within as outlined by the Cardinal, the prospect of confronting the root causes of violence are well within our reach. It is a journey started about 2000 years ago, but we have yet to accept its truth.

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